Circumcision and the Copts

A History

Part 1

Jacques de Vitry (or James of Vitry) was a Crusader and Bishop of Acre at the time of the 5th Crusade (1213 – 1221 AD), which was directed at the Ayyubid state in Egypt. He had some knowledge of the Copts, and met some of them in person. He considered the Copts, who were called Jacobites by the Crusaders, heretics, because they did not recognise the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. When he wrote his *Historia Orientalis* in 1220 AD, he talked, *inter alia*, about the Copts, and described some of their practices, which he regarded as non-Christian and repugnant. One of the practices that drew his attention was circumcision, about which he wrote: “Ever since the Enemy sowed discord in them, and blinded for a long time by a lamentable and miserable error, most of them practice the circumcision of their newborns of both sexes, in the manner of the Saracens. They do not wait for the grace of baptism to make the circumcision of the flesh unnecessary, just as in the blossoming of the fruit the flower fades.”

This is just one piece of evidence that circumcision had been practiced in Coptia in the thirteenth century. As we move on to subsequent centuries more evidence emerge that circumcision became widely followed by Copts. We have this not just from European travellers to Egypt but also from the Copt, Josephus Abudacnus (Yusuf ibn Abu Dhaqn), who wrote in Latin while in Europe in the early 17th century his *Historia Jacobitarum Seu Coptorum*. On the chapter dealing with Coptic baptism, he touched on circumcision: “Circumcision is diligently observed, and that on the eighth day after birth, and this not only in the principal cities where there is a great concourse of people, but also in villages, and in the country, with the greatest rigour.” The strength of the circumcision tradition within Coptia has even suggested to him that bizarre and erroneous opinion that the Copts (also called Jacobites) had descended “of the ancient Patriarch Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham.” To this day, circumcision is practiced within Coptic societies in Egypt and Sudan, as within Muslims, and clearly regarded as traditional.

*The evidence suggests that the Copts did not practice circumcision until sometime after the late 9th century.*

*The truth is that circumcision is not original but foreign to the Copts – it was a Muslim tradition.*

Returning to de Vitry, one finds that the evidence that circumcision was a problem in Coptia of the 13th century is not in dispute. What can, however, be matters of debate are the time the practice began within Coptic society, the extent to which it was spread then, the degree to which it was accepted by Copts, and
whether it was performed initially on both sexes or on boys only. It is suggested by de Vitry that the Copts started practicing circumcision “Ever since the Enemy sowed discord in them, and blinded for a long time by a lamentable and miserable error,” by which he means since the Copts rejected the theology of Chalcedon in 451 AD, and separated from both Rome and Constantinople about Christology. But, by adding that the Copts circumcised their children “in the manner of the Saracens (Muslims)”, one is driven to think that he actually mean that the practice began sometime after the Arab occupation of Egypt in 642 AD. If that is what he really meant, he does not pin it down to any particular period within the five or six centuries that had intervened between the Arab Conquest in the seventh century and the thirteenth century in which he made his viewpoint.

De Vitry definitely thinks that the Copts knew not circumcision at least until Chalcedon. What do Coptic sources say? Unfortunately, Coptic sources are largely silent on this matter, but there is important evidence from the History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria that the Copts did not circumcise their children in the ninth century, evidence that has largely been ignored by historians and anthropologists. John II, the biographer of the 52nd Coptic patriarch, Joseph [Yu’sab] I (830 – 849 AD), tells us an interesting story about the relationship between the Copts and the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) of the time:

“There was at that time a bishop named John, whom the father, Abba James [50th Coptic patriarch (819 – 830)], had ordained for the land of the Abyssinians. Now the king of the Abyssinians had gone forth to war. Then the people became disaffected, and drove away that bishop, and appointed another of their own free choice, thus breaking the canon. And the aforesaid bishop returned to Egypt and took up his abode at the Monastery of Baramus in Wadi Habib, because he had first become a monk there. But the Lord, who loves mankind, and desires to save them and restore them to the knowledge of the truth, did not allow that country and its inhabitants to remain in their disobedience, but he raised up against them the evangelical throne once more.”

As it seems, Abyssinia was hit by defeat in war, drought, famine and disease; and this prompted the king to write to Patriarch Joseph I begging him to send Bishop John back, to which the Coptic prelate obliged. However, on the return of Bishop John to Abyssinia, a new complication arose:

“After this, Satan, the enemy of peace, suggested an idea to some of the people of that country. Accordingly, they waited upon the king, and said to him: “We request thy majesty to command this bishop to be circumcised. For all the inhabitants of our country are circumcised except him”. And the working of Satan was so powerful that the king approved this proposal, namely that the aged bishop should be taken and circumcised, or else that he should return to the place whence he had come. And when the bishop recollected the hardships of his journeys, both when he departed and when he returned,
and then of what he would experience again, he dreaded the difficulties of the road both by land and water. So he said: “I will submit to this, for the salvation of these souls, of which the Lord has appointed me shepherd without any merit of mine. Yet now Paul the apostle enjoins us, saying: ‘If any man is called without circumcision, let him not be circumcised’”. So when he made this concession to them, God manifested a miracle in him, as he wrote to our father the patriarch, Abba Joseph; namely, that when they took him to circumcise him, and stripped him, they found the mark of circumcision in him, as if he had been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. And he swore in his letter that he knew nothing of this before that day. Thus the king and the people of the country were satisfied, and rejoiced greatly over this wonder, and accepted the bishop with joy.”[14]

The “mark of circumcision” which the Abyssinians found on him, and which the biographer John II calls a “miracle”, might have been what is called in medicine “congenital circumcision” – a condition in which an individual is born with deficient foreskin (prepuce) that gives the impression that the person had been circumcised.[15] Bishop John must have had it since his birth but in his innocence he didn’t know the difference. Be it as it may, one thing is clear – the Coptic bishop, as the story tells us, was not humanly circumcised by the time of his arrival in Abyssinia for the second time. Rather than go through the difficult and hazardous journey back to Egypt, and in order to save the souls of his Abyssinian flock, Bishop John accepted going through circumcision in his old age. He knew that circumcision wasn’t a Christian practice, and so he invoked St. Paul’s words: “If any man is called without circumcision, let him not be circumcised.”[16]

The story of Bishop John clearly shows us that the Copts, unlike the Abyssinians, did not know circumcision in the ninth century. Furthermore, they did not accept circumcision on theological grounds. There is nothing in the story to suggest that Bishop John’s case (not being circumcised) was singular. A few authors have stipulated that circumcision has always been practiced by the Egyptians; that it was Pharaonic tradition; that it continued throughout the Roman-Greek period; that the Egyptians even after they became Christian nation continued to circumcise their children. Otto F. A. Meinardus, in his *Christian Egypt, Faith and Life*,[17] certainly gives that impression, and that the Copts inherited circumcision from their ancient forefathers. Whatever the case was before the Christianisation of Egypt, and even then the evidence for that is disputable at several points,[18] Meinardus does not present us with any proof that the Copts, after their conversion to Christianity, or in the first centuries after the Arab occupation, practiced circumcision. Furthermore, he either does not know of the story of Bishop John or intentionally ignores it.

The truth of the matter, but not all of it, is what the French author Jacques Tagher has put under “What Copts took from Muslims”: “Amongst the customs that the Copts took from the Muslims early is the circumcision of children, which had been banned by Christianity and wasn’t practiced in Egypt prior to the
Arab invasion".[19]

But, if the Copts did not practice circumcision in the ninth century, at least until 866 AD when John II wrote the Biography of Joseph I, for over two centuries after the subjugation of Egypt by the Arabs, when did they exactly start performing it? When did it spread widely and become accepted tradition? What social and political changes within Egypt and Coptic society influenced its introduction, first as an optional custom and later as a compulsory matter? Was there any resistance to its introduction? What social and theological debate went on? How can we characterise the adoption of a foreign tradition that ran contrary to our Christian teachings? And what about female circumcision? In a few words, why introduce (or reintroduce if you really believe it existed prior to the Christianisation of Egypt) a practice that had become defunct for good for many centuries?

Part 2

In Part I, we discussed how circumcision was not known to the Copts until at least the ninth century. In this part, we shall discuss how and why circumcision of boys came to be introduced into Coptic society towards the end of the eleventh century, and how the Coptic Church reacted to it.

But, if the Copts did not practice circumcision in the ninth century, when did they start that? We don’t know when exactly. However, there is circumstantial evidence that the Copts began emulating the example of the Muslims sometime in the second half of the Fatimid Period (1074 – 1171),[20] and that circumcision became common during the Ayyubid Period (1171 – 1250 AD), and thereafter. This is the period of the language shift of the Copts from Coptic to Arabic in Lower Egypt,[21] particularly in and around al-Qa’hira (Cairo) and Misr (Old Cairo) environs, the two most important centres of Muslim administration.[22] This is also the period in which, following, and in consequence of, the Arabisation of the Copts,[23] Islamic assimilation or culturalisation of the Copts started – a process by which Copts, as individuals or collectively, consciously or subconsciously, abandoned their traditions, customs, behaviours, etc.; or in one word their culture – and acquired parts of Islamic culture to which influence they had been exposed. We can say that the twelfth and thirteenth are the centuries that witnessed the birth of these two interdependent processes. Not only did the Copts start assimilating the Muslim tradition of circumcision but also other bad social habits such as veiling and seclusion of women, banning the bridegroom from seeing the bride before marriage, first cousin marriages, and concubinage and divorce.[24] It was inevitable as the Apocalypse of Samuel of Kalamoun[25] had warned us: the lingual barriers first broke down when influential Coptic clerks in al-Qa’hira and Misr showed more interest in teaching their children Arabic rather than Coptic in order to advance their vocational careers. This resulted in Copts speaking, writing and reading Arabic while knowing little Coptic, which meant that they neglected the study of Coptic literature, and became ignorant of their intellectual heritage that underpinned their unique identity. When Copts, so alienated from their own culture, began to be exposed
to the cultural influence of the dominant religion of the state and its social norms, it was just a matter of
time when Arabic and Islamic culture displaced some of the known Coptic traditions, and replaced them
with foreign practices. The introduction of circumcision into our nation must be seen as just one of the so
many manifestations of this phenomenon.

Islam evidently advocated circumcision (*khi’tan*), and that was on the authority of Muhammad himself, as
his deeds and sayings (*hadith*) that have been relayed to us in Islamic literature tell us.[26] Muslim
scholars, whether Shiite or Sunni, codified the practice of circumcision, whether that of males or females,
in their writings, and regarded it as part of *Sharia*.[27] Some Muslim authorities even advocated executing
a man who delayed in circumcising himself, or even waging war on the inhabitants of a country if they
reached a unanimous decision to abandon circumcision.[28] So uncircumcision (*ghalaf*) became social
stigma in Muslim societies and the uncircumcised (*aghlf*, m.; *ghlf*, f.) social outcasts since
circumcision was regarded as one sign by which *al-Mu’minun* (the Faithful) and *al-Kuffar* (the infidels)
could be distinguished. The words *aghlf* and *ghlfa* (or the sons of *ghlfa*) have often been used in
Muslim societies as swearing words.[29] Islamic circumcision, unlike in Jewish practice (which we shall
see shortly), is usually performed at a later age, often at five or six years, or even beyond that.[30] The
Fatimids, who invaded Egypt in 969 AD, were known to be staunch supporters of circumcision, and
performed it *en masse* with much celebration, festivities and spending of money.[31] The fourth Fatimid
caliph, Al-Muizz Lideenillah (932 – 975), who became Egypt’s first Fatimid caliph, is said to have
circumcised three of his children in 962 AD,[32] and ordered all his subjects to do so. He spent huge
amounts of money on that, with each circumcised child receiving 150-200 *dirham* and a new attire. The
ceremony was done in public, continued daily for a month, and each day, we are told, 5,000-10,000
children were circumcised. In Al-Mansuriya,[33] the Fatimid seat of government then, alone 250,000
went under the knife. In Sicily half a million *dinars* were spent on circumcision of children during that
month. There is no doubt that the Fatimids raised the celebration of circumcision to a high level hitherto
unknown, and made it a public social event – and Egypt seems to have taken that from them and kept it
throughout the following centuries. Edward William Lane, who visited Egypt in the 1820s and 1830s, tells
us in his *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* about the lavish ceremonies
and festivities attendant upon the circumcision of boys, whether children of common Egyptians, grandees
or pashas.[34]

The position of Christianity on circumcision is a peculiar one and cannot be understood without reference
to early history of Christianity when it was still in the early stages of differentiation from Judaism. The Old
Testament tells us that Yahweh called Abraham and entered into a covenant with him, by which Abraham
and his descendants after him, generation after generation, should circumcise their foreskin, “... and this
shall be the sign of the Covenant between myself and you. When they are eight days old all your male
children must be circumcised... My Covenant shall be marked on your bodies as a mark in perpetuity. The
uncircumcised male, whose foreskin has not been circumcised, such a man shall be cut off from his people: he has violated my Covenant.”[35] While Judaism took circumcision as a religious duty, Christianity insisted that that Covenant had been replaced by Christ’s sacrificial death; and the converted, whether Jews or Gentiles, became members of the new Israel simply by being baptised, and accepting the grace of God, through Jesus Christ. That was what St. Paul insisted on in the face of what a minority of Jewish Christians from Judea had called for, namely that those newcomers from Gentile background should get themselves circumcised and accept the Law of Moses, the Torah, before they could be admitted to the Christian fold. Without that they claimed they would not be saved and accepted by God as the old Covenant still stood.[36] To St. Paul, who took the leading role on this matter, circumcision was superseded by baptism; and, therefore, was rendered meaningless and futile.[37] His anti-circumcision stance was an uncompromisingly theological one – insisting on performing circumcision after one had turned Christian robbed him of the liberty he enjoyed in Christ Jesus, and reduced him to slavery.[38] This was the position Egyptians inherited from St. Mark, a close associate of St. Paul, when he introduced Christianity to their land in the first century. For the Coptic Church the question about circumcision was decided once and for all by the Pauline theology. Origen in his Contra Celsum, which he wrote in 248 AD, tells us that Christ’s disciples were “forbidden to circumcise themselves, and are reminded [by the apostle]: ‘If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.’[39] ”[40]

The Pauline verse which Bishop John had quoted to the Abyssinians in the 9th century as he tried to convince them not to insist upon his circumcision, “If any man is called without circumcision, let him not be circumcised,”[41] seems to have been the foundation on which the Coptic Church based its position when circumcision was introduced later on into Coptic society: circumcision does not have any religious significance, and no man should practice the removal of his foreskin if he had been “called in” uncircumcised, that is if he had already received the grace of baptism. However, as boys were traditionally baptised at the age of forty days, it seems that a window of opportunity in the first forty days of life – when children were not yet technically ‘Christian’ – existed for those who wished to circumcise their children. That would not have been regarded as injurious to the Faith.

So as the newly acquired custom of circumcision was being introduced to Coptic societies by influential lay Copts, the Church felt the need to address and regulate it. For this a few ecclesiastical canons were issued and reaffirmed. The fact that almost all Coptic Church canons in the 12th and 13th century covered this topic, while earlier canons didn’t, is just another prove that circumcision was not original in Coptia, and that it was a new introduction in the Middle Ages. The earlier canons of the Coptic Church, which had often been enacted to address new problems as they emerged, never spoke about circumcision. These include the canons of Peter I (300 – 311 AD), Cyril I (412 – 444 AD), Timothy II (458 – 480 AD) and Athanasius II (488 – 494 AD).[42] Even the first known canonical system of the Middle Ages, that of Patriarch Christodoulos (1047 – 1077 AD), which was produced in 1048 AD, containing 33 canons, had no
mention of circumcision, even as its first canon dealt with a baptismal matter.[43] It is likely that the Copts did not yet know circumcision, or it represented a negligible social problem to require regulation by Christodoulos.

The three subsequent collections of canons that followed those of Christodoulos', however, discussed circumcision – witness to the appearance of the practice of circumcision in Coptic society by then, and the need to regulate it in order to make it consistent with Christian faith. The first of these canonical systems is that of Patriarch Cyril II (1078 – 1092 AD), which is known to have been produced in 1086 AD.[44] Its 19th canon states: “The Faithful who would like to circumcise their boys ought to circumcise them before baptism. No one should circumcise his son after baptism. Whoever breached this should be interdicted, and not have share with us.”[45] One reads from this that the Copts, who adopted the tradition from the Muslims, circumcised their sons at the same age as Muslims did, that is when they were five years old or later, and that they most probably threw lavish parties and followed the same ceremonies and festivities. It is clear that Cyril II was addressing those few Copts who wished to circumcise their sons – he allowed them to circumcise their boys for as long as it was performed before baptism. Cyril II was succeeded by Michael IV (1092 – 1102 AD) and then Macarius II (1102 – 1131 AD). No canons are known to have been issued by either; however, we are told by the 13th century Coptic theologian and historian Abu Shakir ibn Butrus al-Rahib, in his Kitab al-Tawarikh, that Macarius II “ended many customs, amongst which Nazarenes’ boys used to be baptised before circumcision, and he made baptism follow circumcision.”[47] We may conclude from this that Cyril II, despite his threat of interdiction and excommunication to Copts who insisted on circumcising their boys after baptism, failed to put a complete halt to the practice of delayed circumcision. One tends to think that those Copts who adopted the practice of Muslim circumcision did that mainly for the attractiveness of the ceremonies and festivities that accompanied it, and which gave them the opportunity to invite and mix with influential Muslims, thereby strengthening their social ties with the powers that be. It is very unlikely that lavish parties were thrown when the baptised were only little babies. The social aspect, and benefits, of circumcision ceremonies, which most probably triggered the original primary drive for Copts to adopt Muslim circumcision in its various aspects, seems to have been behind the failure of earlier efforts by the patriarchs to regulate the new custom.

The patriarch who followed Macarius II was Patriarch Gabriel II (1131 – 1145 AD), and he is known to have produced several canonical collections. The 20th canon of what is known as his ‘32-canon collection’[48] was enacted, together with the rest, within a few years of the start of his patriarchate; and it did confirm the injunction of Cyril II: “No one should be circumcised after holy baptism. He who wants circumcision should do it before (baptism).”[49] There were no threats now of interdiction, presumably because Copts by this time became more obedient, and abandoned late circumcision of their sons – a matter which could be considered as a success story for the Coptic Church. But Gabriel II is interesting in
many ways, not least because we know he had authored a *Nomocanon* that included various elements of ecclesiastical and imperial Byzantine law sometime before his patriarchate, when he was yet a deacon at the church of St. Mercurius, in Misr, and known as Abu al-Ala’ ibn Turaik. In the *Nomocanon* he dedicated Chapter 40 for the collective problems of castration, penile amputation and circumcision. Gabriel II grouped them together because he considered them all to be undesirable mutilation of the body, God’s perfect creation. This thinking of the perfection of human body as the handmade of God had been the foundation of traditional Christian teaching on matters related to mutilation of the body – God’s creation should not be tampered with. The three practices were, therefore, all banned by earlier ecclesiastical law, putting those who performed any of them under sanctions. This theological anti-circumcision position of Gabriel II reminds us of Origen’s earlier statement that Christ’s disciples “were forbidden to circumcise themselves.” In defence of that position, Gabriel II quoted a canon from the First Council of Nicaea, 1 Corinthians 7:18-20, Galatians 5:2-4, Philippians 3:2 and the 20th canon of Epiphanius (bishop of Constantinople). It may bring the reader to better understanding of the repugnance with which Gabriel II must had seen circumcision at that stage if we literally translate into English Philippians 3:2 which he quoted and gave in Arabic: “Beware of the dogs. Beware of the people of circumcision”. This is a bit different from what one finds in most translations of the New Testament; and it helps to bring to the attention of the reader the strength of feeling with which circumcision was seen at earlier stages. Clearly Gabriel II took a theological stance against circumcision before his election to the patriarchate. There is no reason to suggest that he changed that position after his election; however, faced with a new social phenomenon, he did not work to uproot it but rather merely tried to regulate it as his predecessors had done before. Here we have evidently moved from a strict, theological anti-circumcision position to a *laissez-faire* attitude for as long as circumcision did not postdate baptism.

So, as one studies the history of Coptia during this period one may conclude that the subject of circumcision was introduced into our nation by some influential clerks who worked in the Muslim administration in al-Qa’hira and Misr sometime in the late eleventh century; and that they did that most probably to promote their own career through making themselves socially acceptable by Muslims for as much as possible. Circumcision was not widespread across Coptic communities and social strata. Where it was undertaken it was performed only on boys, with no evidence whatsoever that girls’ circumcision was practised by Copts at that early stage. The Coptic Church in the past took a fundamental Pauline attitude against circumcision; however, as it crept into society in the second-half of the Fatimid Period, the Church took a theological stance against it when it was performed after baptism, but assumed a more relaxed, and practical, position about it when it was done before baptism. Circumcision of boys during the first forty days of life was regarded as permissible but remained optional. The regulatory position of the Church, so cleverly devised, was in essence a compromise that allowed influential Copts to adopt a foreign custom previously banned by the Church – and the compromise was seen as consistent with the Pauline theology.
What we see here is a regulation of a foreign Muslim tradition with the only objective of putting it in line with the Faith. Circumcision was not discussed as a health or moral issue, and the effects of adopting an Islamic custom on the national character of the Copts, and its potential assistance in the gradual Islamic culturalisation of the Copts, was not contemplated. Despite the theological challenge circumcision had posed, all parties in Coptia were very much relaxed about it, most probably because it did not represent yet a huge social phenomenon. It is clear that circumcision at that time did not represent a bone of contention within Coptia upon which Copts bitterly divided. Not in the next stage, however, as we shall see.

**Part 3**

*In Part I we saw that the Copts most probably did not know circumcision until at least after the ninth century; and in Part II we saw that circumcision was adopted by some Coptic employees in the Fatimid administration in order ‘to normalise’ themselves and promote their careers, and that the Coptic Church felt obliged to regulate the foreign custom by restricting its practice to before baptism.*

*The first half of the twelfth century was a period in which all parties in Coptia were very much relaxed about circumcision, most probably because it did not represent yet a huge social phenomenon. It is clear that circumcision at that time did not represent a bone of contention within Coptia upon which Copts bitterly divided.*

*But ....*

Not, however, after the dismantling of the relatively tolerant Ismaili, Fatimid Dynasty by Saladin, who established in 1171 AD the Sunni, Ayyubid Dynasty in Egypt (1171 – 1250 AD), and became its first sultan (1171 – 1193 AD). This was a period of intense pressure on the Copts created by the fanaticism of Saladin, the influx of Sunni Muslim scholars who agitated against the Christians, and the intensification of the wars between the Muslims, on one side, and the Franks and Byzantines, on the other, which triggered a strong anti-Christian sentiment that had not been lacking in the first place. The Ayyubid Period, particularly at its beginning and towards its end, was marked by intense, and increasing, hostility towards the Copts. The Ayyubids opened their rule by forcing Christians and Jews to wear distinguishing attires to single them out for insults and further discrimination, sacking all Christians from positions of inspecting and overseeing revenues, and destroying several churches and monasteries across Egypt. What ameliorated the lot of the Copts was only the realisation by Egypt’s new Muslim rulers of the indispensability of the Copts as scribes and accountants in running the administration of the country, and the later treaties of friendship between the Ayyubid rulers and the Crusading Franks, particularly that between al-Malik al-Kamel and Frederick II in 1229 AD. Christians in Egypt were looked at with suspicious eyes, especially those who followed the Melkite creed – and the hostility was always greater
in Misr than in al-Qa‘hira, since the former was the hotbed of Sunni fanaticism.\[63\] To gauge the degree of animosity with which Christians were met, one has to study the History of the Coptic Patriarchs of Alexandria. For instance, in the early months of 1219 AD, and after the defeat of the new sultan al-Malik al-Kamil at the hands of the Franks of the Fifth Crusade, Copts were attacked and massacred,\[64\] and:

“A[fter this [defeat], an order of the Sultan came to send out half of the inhabitants of Misr and al-Qa‘hira to the fight, voluntarily or by compulsion. And the majority of the Muslim people went out; and the privileged, for whom it was not becoming to go out, used to buy themselves off with the price at which they were estimated, in the way of gold, everyone of them according to his condition. As for the Christians who were in al-Qa‘hira, they collected a tax from them, together with those who had means of livelihood; and they were not treated harshly, nor anyone of the inhabitants of al-Qa‘hira. And, finally, they collected in tax from the scribes who resided in it, and they favoured some and they exempted some. And as for Misr, its governor was guided by the Muslim jurisconsults, and he brought the priests of the churches which belonged to the Copts and to the Melkites, and he said to them: ‘Go out!’, and he threatened them, saying: ‘You will go out with the Muslims, but you will not reach with them to the gate of the city before they will kill you. And no one will be able to say to them at this time anything’. And the tendency of the saying was chiefly for the Melkites, because the Muslims used to spread evil reports about them, that they loved the Franks, and that they followed their law in the arrangement of the hair and the omission of circumcision, and what is similar to that.’\[65\]

During this period any identification of the Copts with either the Melkites, who were followers of the Byzantine Church in Constantinople, or the Franks, did not seem to be politically prudent. Many Copts were conscious of that. Consequently, they dissociated themselves further from the Melkites, particularly in their social customs such as the way they grew their hair and in circumcision: Melkites allowed their hair to grow long and did not practice circumcision. So, in differentiating themselves from their fellow-Christians, they increasingly identified with their Muslim rulers. This was a process of Islamic culturalisation,\[66\] which was not limited only to outward appearances, such as hair style and circumcision, but included marital\[67\] and religious\[68\] traditions as well, as we shall see.

But this did not please all Copts. Circumcision in the years that followed the patriarchate of Gabriel II (d. 1145 AD) became a hot debate issue, and created opposition and strong feelings as much as it gained supporters from both laity and clergy. In a way, it can be said that the circumcision controversy, which got entangled with other issues (some social while others theological), seriously divided the Church and the nation, and weakened both. These were the years of Patriarchs Mark III (1166 – 1189 AD),\[69\] John VI (1189 – 1216 AD),\[70\] and Cyril III (1235 – 1243 AD).\[71\] These were also the times of Abu Yasir ibn al-Kustal, Mark ibn al-Kanbar,\[72\] and Metropolitan Mikha‘il of Damietta; three Copts who felt strongly about circumcision, one way or the other.
The change in Coptic culture, by following foreign Muslim customs, horrified many within Coptia, and so they tried to reverse the process. The priest of the church of al-Martuti,\(^\text{[73]}\) Abu Yasir ibn al-Kustal,\(^\text{[74]}\) for instance, discarded circumcision and baptised infants without it,\(^\text{[75]}\) and gave permission for bridegrooms to see their brides before marriage.\(^\text{[76]}\) Another Copt, Mark ibn al-Kanbar\(^\text{[77]}\) (d. 1208 AD), was also a strong opponent of circumcision. Ibn al-Kanbar was blind, but his visual disability did not affect the sharpness of his mind or charisma; or, indeed, his ability to influence the thousands of his followers. Ibn Kanbar was ordained priest at Damsis in the Nile delta, possibly around 1160 AD, during the patriarchate of John V (1147 – 1166 AD). About his learning and his ability to explain the holy books, which he translated from Coptic to Arabic for the benefit of his congregation, there is no dispute; and even his enemies testified to his erudition. As we read his biography, one comes to the conclusion that he made it his mission to resist later innovations that had crept, as by stealth, into the Coptic Church and society, of which many social customs were borrowings from Muslim culture that ran against the grain of older traditions of the Church. For the first fifteen years of his ordainment, he stopped the practice of confession over the censer and reintroduced auricular confession and penance;\(^\text{[78]}\) forbade circumcision; allowed his followers to grow their hair;\(^\text{[79]}\) and banned the practice of burning sandarach in the churches, allowing only frankincense. About circumcision it was his opinion that circumcision wasn’t Christian: “circumcision belongs to the Jews and Hanifs [Muslims], and ... it is not lawful for Christians to resemble the Jews or the Hanifs in any of their traditions which are in force among them in our time.”\(^\text{[80]}\) Abul Makarim, the author of *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*, tells us: “For this doctrine he [ibn Kanbar] set up many proofs;”\(^\text{[81]}\) but unfortunately none of his books seem to have survived so that we can judge for ourselves.

However, in a letter written by Mikha’il, Metropolitan of Damietta, to Abul Makarim we learn that ibn Kanbar commanded his followers “to give up the practice of circumcision, because God created Adam perfect and free from defects; saying, ‘As God created the form of Adam and perfected it, so it is very good,’ and that this tradition of circumcision is not accepted except by the Jews and Hanafis.”\(^\text{[83]}\) This, as we have seen earlier in the Nomocanon of Patriarch Gabriel II, is an orthodox theological position, based on the Epistles of St. Paul and the First Council of Nicaea.

Ibn Kanbar’s opposition to what he thought was not original in the Coptic Church, and which he could prove from using literature written in Coptic language, brought him in 1174 AD to the attention of Patriarch Mark III who banished him to the monastery of St. Antony at the Eastern Desert. Eventually ibn Kanbar was excommunicated for heresy, as, we are told, he rejected the Coptic Church’s position on Christology, and joined the Chalcedonian Mekite sect.\(^\text{[84]}\) As one read the story of ibn Kanbar, one tends to think that he was pushed against his will to take that decision by the way he had been treated for his differing views. It is sad that the social programme of Coptic reformers was mixed with other issues of a more controversial nature,\(^\text{[85]}\) and so was met with much resistance. Consequently, the efforts of both ibn al-Kustal and ibn al-Kanbar to put a stop to the practice of circumcision were frustrated; and they failed to reverse the trend in the change of Coptic culture.
From that time on we observe hardening of positions, and an emerging pattern within some Coptic clergy that was not satisfied with presenting circumcision as an optional undertaking for as long as it was performed before baptism, but actively defended it as a tradition that was sanctioned by the Church and rooted in history. Mikha'il, Metropolitan of Damietta,[86] under whose authority the church at Damsis fell, was the main adversary of Mark ibn al-Kanbar. He preached that circumcision was an ancient tradition in the Egyptian Church; that the Egyptians borrowed it from the Jews; and that St. Mark the Evangelist, founder of the Church of Alexandria and its first patriarch, approved its practice when he found the Egyptians performing it. In astonishing passage, he tries to explain for us the origin of circumcision and the spread of its practice to Egypt, through Hagar,[87] a long time ago – as he believes – and definitely before the advent of Christianity in Alexandria in the first century:

“After Sarah had driven away Hagar from her house and her son Ismael with her, as the Law affirms, Hagar withdrew to Yathrib of the country of the Higaz and to Faran. And Ismael grew up, and God beautified him in the eyes of the women of the people of Yathrib, and they asked his mother to give him in marriage. And she said: ‘We are a circumcised people, both the men and the women of us and we do not marry, except with those like us.’ And when they had circumcised themselves, Ismael married them, and God fulfilled His promise to him, and granted to him twelve princes. And circumcision spread in that country and in that which was neighbouring to it, and it became firmly established among the Copts of Egypt when they witnessed the victory of God for the circumcised, namely the children of Israel. And when the Apostle Mark evangelized them, he did not disapprove it for them, and they continued it.”[88]

There is no evidence to my knowledge in any Coptic document, other than this, to support the assertion of Metropolitan Mikha’il that St. Mark had allowed the first Egyptians who converted to Christianity in Alexandria to circumcise their children, against the Pauline theology on the matter.[89] As we have seen in the case of Bishop John, the Copts most probably did not know circumcision in the 9th century. Furthermore, had circumcision been a common practice amongst the Copts, one would expect Church Law to regulate it, at least in its relationship to baptism; but the truth is that no ecclesiastical canon is known to have attempted to do that prior to 1086 AD, when Patriarch Cyril II (1078 – 1092 AD) promulgated his canons. Bishop Mikha’il seems to be wrongly intimating that “the children of Israel” circumcised not only their boys but also their girls, and that the Egyptians, before the advent of Christianity, learned that from them. What Bishop Mikha’il’s story tells us is that, in the process of defending a foreign custom that had been introduced to us by Islam, some Coptic Church leaders were prepared to ignore fundamental Christian teachings that were solidly based on the New Testament, and resort to myth creation. Actually, there is evidence that Bishop Mikha’il might have taken his story of Hagar and Ismael, which has no place in the Old Testament, from Muslim sources. The story seems to have appeared for the first time in Muslim writings in the ninth century. Al-Jahith (781 – 869 AD) informs
us that, “Male and female circumcision was practiced by Arabs since the time of Abraham and Hagar until today.”[90] Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (803 – 871 AD) elaborated on the story; [91] and so did Al-Tabari (838 – 923 AD), who explains to us how female circumcision ‘became a norm between women’:

“Sarah said to Abraham, ‘Take Hagar as a concubine’. And so Abraham slept with Hagar, and she got pregnant with Ismail. Afterwards, Abraham slept with Sarah, and she got pregnant with Isaac. When Sarah delivered Isaac and he grew up, he fought with Ismail, and Sarah [because of this] was crossed with Ismail’s mother, and became jealous of her, and so she sent her out. But later, Sarah returned Hagar back, only to get crossed with her again, and drive her away once more. But a second time she returned her. However, this time Sarah swore that she would cut off part of Hagar’s, and said, ‘I shall cut her nose or her ear, so that she is disfigured’; then she said, ‘No, I shall cut her genitalia. And so she circumcised Hagar … and for this reason women became circumcised ... And then Sarah said, ‘[Hagar] should not live in the same country where I live’. And so Allah inspired Abraham to go to Mecca, where he left Hagar and her son there.”[92]

The best that could be made of Bishop Mikha’il’s statement is that St. Mark did not want to antagonise the Egyptians when he found that the custom of circumcision was so rooted in their culture, and so he left it optional for them, particularly as, unlike with the Jews, it did not carry any theological significance. This, however, is unlikely, and, as we have shown, later evidence did not support the theory that circumcision was customary with the Copts. But Mikha’il’s opposition to ibn Kanbar, as some of his writings would suggest, such as his A Justification of the Peculiarities of the Copts,[93] might had been driven by a passion to drive a deeper wedge between the Copts and the Melkites (and Franks), by banning Copts from emulating Melkite customs, rather than by a desire to assimilate with Muslim culture. Other matters Bishop Mikha’il listed as peculiar to the Copts, and defended, included shaving of the head, marriage of first cousins, confession to God alone,[94] and making the sign of the cross with one finger from left to right.[95] His motive might have been political – he was appointed bishop of Damietta, which was a front town in the conflict between the Crusaders and the Muslims; and he was probably keen to distance himself, and his flock, from any association with the current enemies of the state. For this, he drove an even deeper wedge between the Copts, on one hand, and the Byzantines and Franks, on the other hand. The schism now was not resting solely on the Christological controversy,[96] but was being consolidated by differences in social habits.

Patriarch John VI, a lay Copt from Misr (as his predecessor Mark III) before his consecration in 1189 AD, and a contemporary of Bishop Mikha’il of Damietta, was a staunch supporter of circumcision too. He took, in addition, a strong position against the lengthening of hair and, most importantly, auricular confession. This last put him in direct clash with the man who would become his successor, Patriarch Cyril III, as we shall see. John VI was a defender of tradition as he found it, and he considered circumcision as one of
these traditions, even if it was, as we know, only introduced late into Coptic society. He was, therefore, not contented with simply making circumcision optional, allowing Copts to practise it for as long as it was performed on baby boys before baptism, but made it for the first time mandatory. The Coptic theologian and historian Abu Shakir ibn Butrus al-Rahib, in his Kitab al-Tawarikh that “Patriarch John VI completely eradicated confession from amongst the Copts; and emphasised (the importance of) circumcision, commanding that it must be performed; and he insisted on it.”[97] Although it is not clear from the text, it could be understood that John VI made it an excommunicable offense on any Copt not to circumcise. It could be said that with John VI circumcision became obligatory on all Copts, and was treated as a sacred, old tradition sanctioned by St. Mark the Evangelist himself no less. This is a new development – the borrowed Muslim circumcision social custom was now institutionalised by the Coptic Church, and made to be seen as authentic, or long standing Coptic tradition, at least predating the Arab Conquest of Egypt in 640 AD. We have moved a long way from the Coptic position on circumcision in the days of Bishop John in the ninth century, when circumcision was virtually unknown in Coptic society, and those of Patriarch Gabriel II in the first half of the twelfth century, when circumcision was a new social novelty, and treated by the Church as a social option left for individual Copts to decide on, and for as long as it was practiced before baptism.

In Part IV we shall see how circumcision became an issue of contention mingled with other serious issues which plagued the Coptic Church and society, and what the final position on circumcision which Coptia adopted was.

Dioscoros Boles

We encourage our readers to read the many learned articles and postings written by Dioscoros Boles on the website “On Coptic Nationalism”, http://copticliterature.wordpress.com/author/copticliterature/

– Editor

[1] By Jacobites is meant the anti-Chalcedonian Christians, those who rejected the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 AD, mainly Copts and Syrians. They were called Jacobites after the bishop of Edessa, Jacob Baradaeus (543 – 578 AD), who had an important role in consecrating bishops in the Coptic Church during its persecution by the Byzantines.

[2] On the character of Jacques de Vitry, see: Robert Payne, The Crusades, A History (London; Robert Hale; 1994); p. 290. He writes about de Vitry: “His was not an altogether pleasant character, for he was moralistic to a fault, pompous, self-assured, and apoplectic. His hatred bordered on biting contempt. Heretics, schismatics, half-castes, lawyers, usurers, and women dressed in finery received violent tongue-lashings from him.”
The other two practices he mentioned were the auricular confession and tattooing. Christian Cannuyer, *Coptic Egypt, the Christians of the Nile* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2001); pp. 130-131.

*Coptic Egypt, the Christians of the Nile*; p. 130.

The term Coptia is used to indicate the Coptic nation.

Otto F. A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt, Faith and Life* (Cairo; American University Press; 1970); pp. 329-332. Meinardus compiles the evidence by Johann Michael Wansleben (1664), Antoine Gonsale (1665-1668), Richard Pococke (1736-1741), Carsten Niebuhr (1762), James Bruce (1768-1773), C. S. Sonnini de Manoncour (1777-1780), W. G. Browne (1792-1798), and John Lewis Burckhardt (1813-1814). The focus in his pages was on female circumcision.


The book appeared in Latin, after Abudacnus' death, for the first time in 1675 AD, under the full title *Historia Jacobitarum Seu Coptorum in Aegypto, Libya, Nubia, Aethiopia Tota, & Cypri Insulae Parte Habitantium.* It was translated into English by E. Sadier in two editions, 1692 and 1693 AD, under the title: *The History of the Copts commonly called Jacobites under the Dominion of the Turk and Abyssinian Emperors with some geographical Notes or Descriptions of the several Places in which they live in those Dominions.* I use the 2nd ed. (London; R. Baldwin; 1693).

*Ibid*; p. 16.

John II wrote in 866 AD the biographies of the 47th to the 55th Coptic patriarchs (from Mina I [767 – 774 AD] to Shenute I [858 – 880 AD]). See: *Coptic Encyclopedia*; Vol. 4; 1991; History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria.


The History of the Copts commonly called Jacobites; p. 16.

History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria; pat 4; p. 511.

For congenital and acquired circumcision, see: James T; *A causerie on circumcision, congenital and acquired.* S Afr Med J. 1971 Feb 6;45(6):151-4.
1 Corinthians 7:18.


Jacques Tagher, Coptes & musulmans (Le Caire, 1952). I used the Arabic version which was published by the Coptic Associations in English translation is mine.

The Fatimid Period in Egypt started strong in 969 AD but at the beginning of the reign of the fifth caliph, al-Mustansir billah (1036 – 1094 AD), internal wars, economic crises and epidemics weakened the state. It was the Armenian soldier, Badr al-Jamali, invited by al-Mustansir in 1073 AD to be his vizier, who saved it from total collapse, and by his dynamic energy reduced rebellions and restored its economy. He was followed by five more Armenians, who together with al-Jamali, ruled the state for a total of 58 years, in what is called the “Armenian period”. The rule of the Armenians, which coincided with the beginning of the second Fatimid Period, was favourable to the Copts.

The dating of the beginning of this particular language shift from Coptic to Arabic has been a subject of wide speculations, and has often been misled by putting undue emphasis on writings of the Muslim historian al-Maqrizi (1364 – 1442 AD) and the Coptic theologian Severus ibn al-Muqaffa ʿ or Severus of El Ashmunein (d. 987 AD). There is no doubt that while Arabisation started in Upper Egypt, particularly in the environ of Misr, early, most of Upper Egypt remained speaking Coptic until late.

Misr (or Misr al-Fus’tat) was the ancient town that remained for a long time the main Muslim seat of administration before the Fatimids founded al-Qa’hira in 969 AD and the arrival of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu’izz li Dīn Allāh in 973 AD in it. Today, the Cairo capital of Egypt spread across large area to include both Misr and the ancient al-Qa’hira. What is called now Coptic (or Old) Cairo represents roughly the area of ancient Misr. Al-Qa’hira is the area somewhat north of it around al-Azhar mosque.

Arabisation, in the Coptic context, is the process and phenomenon by which Egyptians/Copts stopped talking in their own Egyptian/Coptic language, and adopted Arabic as their main daily language. It is thus a process of language shift from Coptic to Arabic.

Even as early as 695 AD some Copts started emulating the Muslims in divorcing their wives and pressurizing the Church, by use of the Muslim authorities’ arm, to allow them to remarry again. There is no evidence, however, that these cases were many. We read in the Biography of the 42nd Coptic patriarch, Simon I (689 – 701 AD): “There were at that time men who were like the Gentiles, and abstained from their lawful wives, and took unlawful mistresses, showing their subjection to their passions; and yet they said that they were Christians. But the bishops rejected them, and repulsed them from the Holy Mysteries.
So some of them went to the Amir and said to him: ‘We are forbidden to marry, and they have cast us out so that we are forced to commit fornication’.” Severus of Al’Ashmunein (Hermopolis), History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic church of Alexandria, Part 3: Agathon – Michael I (766 AD). Arabic text edited, translated, and annotated by B. Evetts. Patrologia Orientalis, Tome V (Paris; 1910); p. 43.

[25] The Apocalypse of Samuel of Kalamoun (or Qalamun/Qalamoun) is attributed to the 7th-century Coptic saint, who witnessed the persecution of Cyrus, the Chalcedonian bishop and governor, just before the Arab occupation of Egypt in 640 AD, which he also lived through its first years. There may be an authentic core in it that dates back to St. Samuel, but there is no doubt that the bulk of it is of later composition sometime in the Middle Ages. I tend to think it was a 13th-century composition, but there are differences on its date by different Coptologists. Anyway, the Apocalypse denounces the two interdependent processes of Arabisation and Islamic culturalisation which the Copts went through, and holds them responsible for the negligence of our Christian duties, the abandoning by Christ of our nation, and the continuation of the Arab and Muslim oppression. The Apocalypse of Samuel was translated into French by J. Ziadeh (Revue de l’Orient chrétien; Vol. 20; 1915-1917); pp. 374-407.

[26] The fact that circumcision of both males and females was based on Mohammad’s sunna is not in dispute. The reader can consult the books of Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim. It is acknowledged that there is no mention of circumcision in Koran, and that the emphasis on female circumcision rests on performing the less severe form of it. For more on this matter, read: Sami A. Aldeeb Abu –Sahlieh, Muslims’ Genitalia in the Hands of the Clergy, Religious Arguments about Male and Female Circumcision (August 1998); pp. 22-24.


[29] Ibid; p. 7.

[30] Edward William Lane, in his An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians; Vol. 1 (London; John Murray; 1871); p. 71, writes about circumcision within the Muslims of Egypt: “At the age of about five or six years, or sometimes later, the boy is circumcised” Then in a footnote (1; p. 71), he adds: “Among the peasants, not infrequently at the age of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years.” Although Lane wrote his book in the first half of the 19th century, it is thought that the age at which Muslims circumcised their boys had not really changed from the earlier centuries.

[31] For this, read: Hassan Ibrahim Hassan and Taha Ahmad Sharaf, al-mu’izz lideenillah (Cairo;

[32] Rabia' Awal, 351 AH. Rabia' Awal in that year, started 9 April 962 AD and ended 8 May. The three children we are told of were Abdullah, Nazar and U'kail.

[33] It was the seat of the Fatimid government, and is located near Kairouan, Tunis. The seat of the government moved to Egypt after its occupation in 969 AD, and the establishment of Cairo.

[34] Edward William Lane, An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (London; John Murray; 1871); pp. 244-247; 100-102. The reader may also be referred to my article: Egyptian Play: The Egyptian Fellah, His Wife, the Turkish Nazir, the Arab Sheykh el-Beled and the Coptic Clerk, at: http://copticliterature.wordpress.com/2011/09/29/696/

[35] Genesis 17: 9-14


[37] 1 Corinthians 7:19.

[38] Galatians 2: 4-7.


[41] 1 Corinthians 7: 18.

[42] I go along with Athanasius al-Maqari in his The Canons of Pope Athanasius Patriarch of Alexandria (in Arabic) (2nd ed., Cairo, 2006), that the author of these canons wasn't Patriarch Athanasius I , known as the Great (328–339 AD), the 20th patriarch, but his successor down the line, Athanasius II, who was the 28th patriarch. I have left out other canons that are recognised and used by the Coptic Church but were not produced by Egyptian ecclesiastics. Such works include the canons of Hippolytus, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom.

[43] The 1st canon of Patriarch Christodoulos states: “No male and female should be baptised at the same time (in the same baptismal font)”. Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u'sur alwusta (The Canons of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church in the Middle Ages (in Arabic) (Cairo, 2010); p. 35. The English translation from Arabic is mine.

The ecclesiastic sanction of interdiction entails banning the individual from partaking of the Holy Communion.

Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u`sur alwusta; p. 60. The English translation from Arabic is mine.

See tarikh abi shakir butrus ibn abi alkaram ibn almohazab, alm`arouf bibn alrahib, published by Father Louis Sheikho, the Jesuit (Berut; 1903); p. 139.

Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u`sur alwusta; pp.84-85; 219-234.

Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u`sur alwusta; p. 230. The English translation from Arabic is mine.

Nomocanon, from the Greek, which means rule of the law, is a collection of ecclesiastical law that consists of both canon law (derived from different Church sources) and the Byzantine civil law. On the Nomocanon of Gabriel II, see: Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u`sur alwusta; pp. 90-218.

We know Gabriel II was born 1084 AD. He became patriarch in 1131 AD, when he was 47. He probably wrote his Nomocanon sometime in the 1120s. He worked then as clerk in the Fatimid administration, which he continued to do until his election to the patriarchate. For more on Gabriel II, read his Biography in: History of the patriarchs of the Egyptian Church: known as the History of the Holy Church / by Sawirus ibn al-Mukaffa`, Bishop of al-Asmunin. Vol. 3 pt. 1: Macarius II-John V (A.D. 1102-1167) tr. & annotated by Antoine Khater & O.H.E. Khs-Burmester (Cairo; Société d’archéologie copte; 1968).

Gabriel II says that “The 318 said in the 18th chapter: ‘The circumcised and those who castrate themselves: if they had been afflicted by a disease leading to a surgeon performing an operation on them; or they had been captured by Berbers who forced them to be circumcised or castrated; they should stay in clergy. If any of them performed that on themselves and had no disease to justify it, let he be suspended if he is a priest, and if he is a lay person and wants to be priest let he not be admitted. As for those who were cut by the Berbers, or castrated by their masters, and they deserve priesthood, the canonical law allows
them (if they have no fault).’” By reviewing the 20 authentic canons of the First Council of Nicaea, which was attended by 318 bishops, none mentions circumcision or castration. There are non-authentic 84 canons attributed to the Council, which were in circulation at that time in the area, and perhaps Gabriel II took his quote from them. I could not get access to these non-authentic canons. It remains, however, true that the Copts in the Middle Ages had in circulation different collections attributed to the First Council of Nicaea. We know that from Ibn Kabar (al-Shaykh al-Mu’taman Shams al-Riyasah ibn al-Shaykh al-As’ad Abu al-Barakat ibn Kabar), the encyclopaedic Coptic scholar (d. 1234 AD). Ibn Kabar gives us three lists of the canons of the First Council of Nicaea in his Misbah al-Zulmah, fi Idah al-Khidmah: only the first two include a canon on castration and circumcision (but with different order from that given by Gabriel

[53] “Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.” (1 Corinthians 7:18-20).

[54] “Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” (Galatians 5:2-4).


[56] Epiphanius, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (520 – 535 AD). Gabriel II quotes him: “Any lay person who circumcises himself should be banned from Holy Communion for three years; and any clergy who circumcise should be suspended.” Athanasius al-Maqari, qawaneen batarikat alkaneesa alqubtiya fil u’sur; pp.196-197.


[58] Saladin is considered in the West as a chivalrous Muslim ruler. This may be true of his later life; however, his early life and rule in Egypt show only a man dominated by Islamic fanaticism. The reader must remember that one of Saladin’s titles was “oppressor of the worshipers of the crosses” (title given him by the Fatimid Caliph, al-‘Adid on 26 March 1169 AD. For this, see: Ayman Fu’ad Sayyid: Les Fatimides en Égypte, Nouvelle Interpretation (Cairo, Al-Dar Al-Misriiya Al-Lubnaniyya, 2000); p. 301-2. The book is in Arabic [al-dawla alfatimiyya fi masr, tafseer jaded]).

[59] About the distinguishing attires and the sacking of Coptic inspectors and overseers of revenues, see pages 106 and 107, respectively, of History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church Known as the History
of the Holy Church by Sawirus ibn al-Mukaffa, Bishop of al-Ashmunin; Vol. III; Part II; Mark III – John VI (1167 – 1216 AD), translated and annotated by Antoine Khater and O. H. E. Khs-Burmester (Cairo, Imprimerie de l’Institut Francais d’Archeologie Orientale, 1970). The author of this part of the History of the Patriarchs wrote it in 1207. He says in page 107 after talking about the sacking of the Christians, “… and not one of the Christians returned to be employed as overseers and inspectors in the days of the State of Salah ad-Din [Saladin], nor of those who ruled after him of his sons and his descendants.”

[60] Ibid; p. 165. The Copts were returned back to the service of the Ayyubid state not as inspectors or overseers of revenues, but as scribes.

[61] For the kind of positive changes that that agreement between al-Malik al-Kamel and Frederick II in 1229 AD had brought, read: History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church Known as the History of the Holy Church by Sawirus ibn al-Mukaffa, Bishop of al-Ashmunin; Vol. IV; Part I; Cyril III, Ibn Laklak (1216 – 1243 AD), translated and annotated by Antoine Khater and O. H. E. Khs-Burmester (Cairo, Imprimerie de l’Institut Francais d’Archeologie Orientale, 1974); pp. 125-6.

[62] The Chalcedonian creed which was set at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. For more, go to n. xlii.

[63] Even before the end of the Fatimid Dynasty, Misr, together with Alexandria, was known to be the centre of Sunni propaganda and what is called “Sunni resistance”.

[64] History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church Known as the History of the Holy Church by Sawirus ibn al-Mukaffa, Bishop of al-Ashmunin; Vol. IV; Part I; Cyril III, Ibn Laklak (1216 – 1243 AD); pp. 55-6.

[65] Ibid; pp. 58-59 (with some changes in translation by me to clarify the meaning. Unfortunately the English translation by Antoine Khater and O. H. E. Khs-Burmester is not very accurate).

[66] Islamic culturalisation (or Islamic assimilation), in the context of the Copts, is the process by which Copts, as individuals or collectively, consciously or subconsciously, abandoned their traditions, customs, behaviours, etc. – or in one word their culture – and acquired parts of Islamic culture to which influence they have been exposed.

[67] Such as marriage of first cousins and sexual segregation (like the ban on bridegrooms to see their brides before marriage).

[68] Such as what is called “confession to God alone”; that is in the absence of a spiritual guide.


Kirillos III. Also known by his pre-pontificate name, Dawud ibn Laqlaq.


For the Church of Al-Martuti, see The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries; pp. 136-141. It is the same Church of the Virgin Mary in Ma’adi, south of Cairo.

Ibn al-Qastal in The Coptic Encyclopedia. Unlike Ibn Kanbar, we don’t have any dates mentioned for Ibn al-Kustal in The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries, however it is clear that he was a contemporary of Ibn Kanbar.

Abul-Makarim in his The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries uses the words “tanseer al-atfal min ghair khitana (baptism of children without circumcision)”(p. 59). It is important to remember that he wrote in 1207, and that his writing probably reflected the changes which Patriarch John VI later introduced, as the reader will see. It is likely that Ibn al-Kustal preached against circumcision, as non-Christian practice, as Ibn Kanbar also did.

The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries; p. 140.

Ibid; pp. 20-43.

Auricular confession was original in the Coptic Church; however, Patriarch John V is believed to have abolished it and allowed confession over the burning censer in church or at home, without the need for doing penance. Whether he actively enacted canons to change the practice or just went with the flow as the practice fell into abeyance, no one knows. Anyway, the Coptic Church of today has reintroduced auricular confession, and Christians must confess their sins at the hand of a priest before they allowed partaking of the Holy Communion.

The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries says, “He also allowed the people to let their hair grow long as the Melkites do.” (Page 21-22). Later the book describes that Ibn Kanbar “commanded them [his followers] not to shave the whole of their heads, but only the crown of the head.” (Page 38).

The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries; p. 22.

Ibid; p. 22.

Mark N. Swanson, however, says that some of the writings of Ibn Kanbar have recently been discovered. See: Mark N. Swanson in his The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt, 641 – 1517(Cairo, The
These allegations we know only from the letter of Bishop Mikha’ïl to Abul Malkarim which one can find in The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries. Some of these are his teaching that “the Holy Trinity is composed of three Gods, each of them absolutely perfect in word and spirit, but having one common nature; and that they resemble Adam, Eve, and Abel, who were three persons with one common nature, each of them being as perfect as the others” (page 39). Also, his teaching that “there was a feminine quality in the Godhead, and he taught that this feminine quality is proper to the Holy Spirit” (page 40).


Hagar was Sarah’s maid and Abraham’s second wife, who gave birth to his first son, Ismael (Ishmael). Her story in the Old Testament is to be found in Genesis 16, 21.


On the Pauline theology on the matter of circumcision, see Part I and Part II of this study.

Al-Jahith, Kitāb al-hayawān (Book of Animals) (Cairo, 1939); Vol. 5, p. 27.


Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk (History of the Prophets and Kings), edited by Muhammad Abul-Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo, Dar al-Ma’arif, 2nd Print); Vol. 1; pp. 253-4.

I have used the English translation as in René-Georges Coquin: Mikha’il in The Coptic Encyclopedia; Vol. 5 (1991). Mark N. Swanson in his The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt, 641 – 1517, page 80, calls it Usages that Distinguishes the Copts. The Arabic title of Bishop Mikha’il’s book would seem to be something like The Customs by which the Copts have become Singular.

See n. 68.
The Copts, followers of the Coptic Orthodox Church, rejected the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, and its definition of the relation of the Godhead and Manhood of Christ. The Melkites, mainly of Greek descent in Egypt, accepted Chalcedon, which was also accepted by Constantinople and Rome. The Chalcedonian definition as F. J. Foakes Jackson says in his The History of the Christian Church “was a Roman formula forced on the Oriental Church by imperial authority.” (Cambridge, J. Hall & Son; 1905; p. 468). The imperial authority was that of Marcian’s (450 – 457 AD); and the Melkites, which is a Syriac word meaning ‘followers of the king’, were the followers of the emperor’s definition.

Tarikh ibn al-Rahib; tr. & ed. by Father Louis Sheikho the Jesuit (Beirut, 1903), p. 141. This was confirmed also by Bishop Yusab in his Tarikh al-Batarika (History of the Patriarchs), ed. Mikha’il Maksi Iskandar (Cairo, 2003); p. 252.